

HOW TO CHOOSE AND PACK A BACKPACK



Camping and hiking go hand in hand. From walking the dog around the campground to family-friendly guided nature walks and full day treks in the backcountry, walking in the woods is a low impact exercise that's beneficial at any age, but it's best to [be prepared](#) before getting on the trail. One of your most important gear purchases, a backpack that fits properly and has the features you need, can make the difference between trail bliss and cranky kids, sore shoulders, and a miserable day..

The tricky thing is that ideal fit and features for one person is likely to be a misfit for another. Packs made for adults will usually create problems for kids. Even borrowing a pack from a friend who's the same size as you can lead to trouble..

There's also a huge selection of packs to choose from. How do you find your perfect match? Pick a winner for every member of your family, and learn how to fill it with essentials for a safe and fun day in the outdoors with our guide to fitting and loading a backpack.

FEATURES TO LOOK FOR

Backpacks are divided into two main categories, daypacks and overnight backpacks. If you're just getting into hiking, a good place to start is with the purchase of a daypack, typically with a volume of 20 to 35 liters. As you increase your time on the trail, add an overnight pack carry anywhere from 30 to 70 liters worth of gear on multi-day trips.

Backpacks come in three frame types: internal, external, and frameless. Internal frame packs are most common because they fit close to the body for stability and tend to be the most comfortable. Consider an external model for carrying irregular loads like kayaking gear, and a frameless pack for ultralight activities like rock climbing.

Seek out models with a suspended mesh back panel for ventilation, multiple zippered compartments for easy access, and side and hipbelt pockets for storing things you'll need frequently, like phone, snacks, and your water bottle. Look for models with a hydration sleeve for your water reservoir, and a hose portal for getting a drink without removing your pack. Finally, check to make sure your pack includes a rain cover, preferably one that attaches to your pack so it won't blow off in a storm.

NICE BUT NOT FOR EVERYONE

High end packs come with loads of enticing features like emergency whistles, daisy chains for attaching gear to the outside of your pack, carabiners, hiking pole tethers, and detachable lids that convert into fanny packs. Consider the activities you'll be doing regularly and weigh benefits against the price points to make your final choice.

FITTING YOUR PACK

You might think backpack weight sits on your shoulders but, with proper fit, it should actually rest snugly on your hips for optimum comfort. As tempting as it may be to order your pack online, getting your backpack properly fitted at a store specializing in outdoor gear is the only way to guarantee comfort on the trail.

Packs come in a range of torso lengths and waist sizes, with some models designed specifically for women and children's smaller frames. Proper body measurement is essential. In addition to adjusting pack length and hipbelt, the shoulder and sternum straps cinch down for a tight, body-hugging fit that doesn't restrict your breathing or movement.

Try on a variety of packs sized to your frame and loaded with 5-10 pounds of gear. Walk around and readjust the straps. Repeat this exercise while walking around your neighborhood to head off problems a few miles into your first hike.

LOADING YOUR GEAR

You don't notice a poorly packed backpack until you've started hiking. That's when things like being off balance and weight resting on your shoulders and neck become really irritating. Avoid a mid-hike redo by following a few simple packing rules Store bulky and less used items like extra clothing layers at the bottom and pack your heaviest gear, like food and water, in the middle of your pack. Top it off with lighter items like a headlamp and first aid kit. Lash accessories that you might need quickly, like water crossing shoes and a bandanna, to outer straps with carabiners.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS: KIDS AND PETS

Children can learn independence, self-sufficiency, and confidence by carrying their own gear. Make it easy and fun by allowing them to pick their pack. Invest in a model with an adjustable torso frame so the pack frame can lengthen as they grow.

If your dog is joining you on the trail, choose a properly ventilated pack to carry scoop bags, treats, a collapsible water bowl, and fetch toys. Make sure the pack isn't too heavy or too large for your dog's size, and test it out at home before taking a longer hike. Keep in mind that you may have to adjust the length of your hike to compensate for the additional weight your dog's carrying and, as your pup ages, you may need to lighten the load.